



On Campus with Max Shulman

(Author of "Breakfast Boy With Check," etc.)

THE OPERATOR

On every American campus there are four standard fixtures: No. 1 - ivy; No. 2 - a statue of the founder; No. 3 - Philip Morris Cigarettes; No. 4 - The Operator.

The ivy is to prevent strangers from mistaking the college for a warehouse. The statue of the founder provides shade for necking when the weather is fine. The Philip Morris Cigarettes are an aid to concentration when you are studious, an aid to sociability when you are sportive, and a source of smoke rings to impress new girls. . . . And The Operator is the man you can't do without.

Well do I remember The Operator on my campus. He was a young man with a ready smile, a quick mind, fifteen complete changes of wardrobe, a six room apartment, a red convertible, and assorted stocks, bonds, securities, and second mortgages.

The Operator's origins were a source of lively speculation. Some said he was left over from the old Capote gang. Some said he was Judge Crater. Some said he sprang from the brow of Zeus.

But, in fact, he was just an ordinary student - to begin with. In his first year he studied hard, took copious lecture notes, got good grades, and made a big reputation as a friend in need. He'd lend you money; he'd let you copy his lecture notes; he'd write themes for you; he'd sit up all night to help you cram for an exam. All of this was done with infinite good nature on his part, and no obligation on yours. . . . The first year, that is.

In the second year The Operator started to operate. He'd still let you copy his lecture notes - but it cost you a quarter. Sitting up to help you cram cost 50 cents an hour till midnight, 75 cents an hour afterwards. His prices for writing themes were based on a sliding scale - a dollar for a "C", two for a "B", three for an "A". A "D" cost you nothing, and if you flunked, you got a dollar credit on the next theme he wrote for you.

His services expanded steadily. He added a line of crib for examinations. He booked bets on football games. He did a bit of bootlegging. He ran a date bureau. He rented cars, tuxedos, non-wilting boutonnières.

But all of these were really sidelines. His main line was lending money. At any hour of the day or night, for any amount from a dollar to a hundred, The Operator was always ready with a sympathetic ear and cash on the barrelhead. And he rarely charged more than 150 percent interest.

Usury and sharp trading are practices not calculated to win affection. Nobody loved The Operator. But nobody did anything about it either. . . . Because undergraduates live in a perpetual state of need - need of money, need of lecture notes, need of romance, need of beer, need of something - and The Operator was the goose that laid the golden eggs and, therefore, safe.

Nor did The Operator seek affection. He just went his well-hoofed way, serene and carefree. . . . No, not quite carefree. One thing troubled him: a fear that some day he might graduate. Graduation, leaving school, would mean the end of his empire. You can't run a business like that from the outside; you must be right in the midst of things, spotting opportunities, anticipating needs, keeping your finger on the public pulse.

So he took great pains to stay in school, but never to graduate. This he accomplished by constantly shifting majors. He would come within a semester of getting a B.A. in sociology and then transfer to law. When he had nearly enough law credits, he'd switch to business administration. Then from business administration to psychology, from psychology to French, from French to history, and so on, meanwhile getting cultured as all get-out, rich as Croesus, and never accumulating quite enough credits for a degree.

Finally, of course, it caught up with him. There came a semester when no matter what he took, he had to wind up with some kind of a degree. He looked frantically through the class schedule trying to find some major he hadn't tried yet. And he found one - physical education. So, sleek and pudgy though he was from high living, The Operator entered the department of physical ed.

It was a mistake. Among the people he had to wrestle and box with were some great hulking fellows who, like everybody else on campus, owed him money.

Their tiny foreheads creased with glow as they regarded The Operator's trembling little body; their massive biceps swelled joyously; their flexors rippled with delight. Rumbling happily, they fell upon him and covered him with lumps, the smallest of which would have taken first prize in any lump contest you might name.

Confused and sick at heart, The Operator dragged his battered members home. He knew he had to get out of physical ed; his life was forfeit if he did not. So, unhappily, he transferred to some other course, and the following June, a beaten man in his cap and gown, received with lifeless hands a diploma and a bachelor of arts degree and shambled out into the great world.

I don't know what happened to The Operator after graduation. It's not a bad guess that he's serving time in some poky somewhere. Or maybe he was lucky and went into the advertising business. If so, he is surely a big man on Madison Avenue today.

But, as I say, I don't know what happened to him. But this I do know: another Operator appeared on campus as soon as this one left, and he in turn was replaced by another, and the process goes on endlessly.

For as long as boy students like girl students better than going to class, as long as parents cling to the delusion that the allowance they had at college is sufficient for their children, as long as blood runs warm and cash runs short, there will be an Operator operating on every campus everywhere.

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